

# The Polar Express

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Summary: Christmas was supposed to be a time of celebration for the people of Tau Serra. Unfortunately, the Covenant had different ideas. Now a Marine finds herself protecting a train full of children, as well as discovering what it means to believe... COMPLETE.

## 1. Chapter 1

AN: Well, to celebrate Christmas, as well as being in a very magnanimous mood, I've written up a special little Christmas special featuring that Marine officer we all know and love. Anyways, time for the legal matters. The title and some elements of this fic are based on the novel of the same name, which I do not own. All that stuff belongs to its respectful owners.

\_"Being a proud veteran of the UNSC Marine Corps, I've been through more battles and conflicts than I care to remember. I've also had my share of men and women who feel that they have gone through "religious" or "magical" experiences, situations that seemed almost impossible yet happened right before their very eyes. However, I've always remained skeptical about these "experiences", since I was brought up to believe that there was always a perfectly good explanation for everything. If there was ever a time where I thought that there was something remotely out there that couldn't possibly be explained, it would be during a certain Christmas back in 2551â€¦|\_"\_

\_From the memoirs of Karla A. Wellings\_

Tau Serra, Aphrodites System

**\*\*December 14, 2551\*\***

The cold night air bit into Lieutenant Karla Wellings' face as she lay out in the snow, staring at the glittering patchwork of stars above her. She didn't like to admit it, but snow was completely alien to her, since she had lived or served in temperate regions and

planets for most of her life. Though she was taught about the physical properties of snow and had seen recordings and pictures of it, Karla had never actually had the chance to see and feel it in person.

And to tell the truth, she rather liked it.

Karla's radio buzzed as somebody tried to establish a connection to her. Karla sighed. She was just beginning to enjoy her few precious moments of peace. She turned it on and heard the voice of a radio operator whose voice was as cold and empty as the snow around her.

"Lieutenant Wellings, thirty minutes have passed. Please report your status."

Karla sat up and glanced over at her crewmates. There was Sergeant Williams, her shotgun and backup driver, making sure the Warthog engines were still warm, and her gunner Private Karen Sykes, who was just a few feet away making snow angels. Karla raised her eyebrow in a silent question. Williams and Sykes glanced at her and quickly shook their heads.

"Uhhh, we still appear to be unable to get a fix on our position." Karla responded. "I think the magnetics are interfering with the GPS. We'll report back in aboutâ€¦" Karla checked her watch, "one hour."

"Roger that." The operator clearly sounded unconvinced, but there wasn't really anything he could do. "I'll let Captain Armbruster know right away."

"So how long do you think till Captain A. gets pissed enough to try and find us himself?" Karen asked.

"That's assuming he doesn't get lost in the process." Williams laughed. "The guy has to ask directions to find the damn bathroom."

Karla grinned. "He won't do squat, because I'm the unlucky individual who has to do all his work for him. Though we'd better get back soon or he'll have us cleaning latrines for the rest of the month."

"Ew, what a way to spend Christmas." Karen grimaced.

"Yeah. It seems like a drag, having to spend it on the front lines." Williams sighed. "You know, back on Earth before I joined up, me and my family used to celebrate Christmas like the Covenant never existed. Sure, there was the rationing and the media blackouts, but nobody seemed concerned at the time."

"And they still probably aren't." Karla frowned. "But let them enjoy their delights. After all, they can probably be their last."

"Jeez, Lieutenant, you seem to have a cynical attitude about the holidays. Next thing you know, you're going to say that you never believed in Santa."

Karla didn't say anything.

"\_No\_." Karen gasped. "Don't tell me you never believed in Santa Claus \_ever\_."

"I prefer to think myself as skeptical rather than cynical." Karla calmly replied. "Since I find it hard to believe that some jolly fat man can span entire star systems, delivering presents to billions of children in a single standard day, and doing it all in a reindeer powered sled."

"Sheesh, no wonder why everybody's afraid of you." Karen grimaced.

"Oh, believe me, there are a LOT more reasons." Williams said glumly. "The only thing that confirms that she is even vaguely human is the fact that she constantly talks to me about her kid sister."

"Really?" Karen's eyes widened. "I didn't take you for the big sister type."

Karla brushed off some snow that had been piling up on her shoulder. "That's because you're new, young, and a bad judge of character."

"Grouch." Karen grumbled.

Karla however, didn't respond. The conversation reminded her about Samantha, and Karla was now wondering what her little sister was up to now. The last time she had seen Sam in person, Karla was preparing to leave for accelerated officer training on Reach. Through some messages and some work on Karla's part, Sam was enrolled in the War Orphan Education Program. The program provided education, housing, and basic needs to orphans who had at least one parent that served as an officer in the Navy or Marines for more than two years, all at the cost of the UNSC. However, the catch was that all applicants were required to volunteer for public service once they reached the age of eighteen, and during these turbulent times, it would most likely be something of a military nature.

It was no secret that Sam wanted to be Marine, just like her big sister. From the mail she managed to receive, Karla knew that Sam was planning to transfer out of the facility she was staying in on Earth to Aeola for boot camp. However, due to the results of her aptitude and personality tests, as well as her marksmanship abilities, the recruiters decided Sam would make a better sniper than officer, which was all the better. Karla was terrified at the thought of somebody as carefree as Sam leading a platoon of Marines.

That reminded Karla of something. She reached into one of her vest pockets and pulled out a silver bell, which shone brilliantly under the moonlight. It was a gift from Sam shortly before Karla left for training. Sam had boasted that it was a "lucky bell" that Santa Claus had given her one Christmas. As usual, Karla was skeptical about the claim, but Sam would always be Sam. Hell, Sam probably \_still\_ believed Santa was real, knowing how her mind worked. Anyways, Karla had always carried the bell around, but could never figure out why. It was pretty, but it was also broken. Not matter how many times she tried, Karla had never been able to get the bell to make a sound. Karla remembered one time when she wrote to Sam complaining that it was broken. Then Sam responded that it "worked fine", that Karla

"wasn't using it right", and that "it made the most beautiful sound you ever heard."

Karla shook her head. Sam would always be Sam.

"We should be getting back now." Karla got to her feet and started brushing off the snow that had collected on her armor. "If we stay out here too long, we really are going to get lost."

Tau Serra was like many of the other Outer Colonies. It was fairly out of the way and well populated. There weren't any distinguishing features that made it special, except for the fact that it was in the path of an incoming Covenant armada. Even with the ONI Section 2 media blackouts, word of the armada was somehow leaked to the general public. In a wave of panic, many of Tau Serra's inhabitants desperately tried to find a way off the rock. Civilian ships of all types and sizes were tasked to pick up refugees and ferry them to nearby planets. The UNSC Navy provided some assistance, but the evacuation was a long way from complete. One of the largest tragedies was taking place in the city of Bell Haven. The city's spaceport was horribly unprepared for the sudden influx of refugees. At any point of time, the queue to get inside was at least a kilometer long. What was even more tragic was that many of the families that lived in the suburbs outside of the city were fated be last to reach the port.

Sensing the distress and panic beginning to grow throughout the population, the officer in charge of the ground forces, General Marcus Black, organized a program codenamed "Polar Express". For their guaranteed safety, children below the age of twelve were permitted to board a train bound for the nearby city of Helio, which had a larger and more efficient port. A matter of hours after the program was announced, the train terminal was filled with hundreds of parents and their children, eager for a chance at salvation.

**\*\*Bell Haven Main Terminal\*\***

"My god." General Marcus Black sighed when he looked down on the lines of parents ushering their children into the waiting train. "How have things come to this? How are we supposed to explain to these children that we're putting them on a train because an alien threat is coming to exterminate us all? I don't know about you, Lieutenant, but I find trying to explain all this to a ten year old beyond my expertise."

"Well, we don't have to worry about that, since we don't have to." Lieutenant Ryan Hubbard said smugly.

General Black narrowed his eyes and looked at the Office of Naval Intelligence agent suspiciously. "What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm saying is, we don't have to tell these kids everything." Hubbard motioned to the train. "It's basic Section Two protocol: tell the truth, but just not all of it. We just say that the train is taking them to see Santa Claus. That's why the age limit has been set so low, because statistically, children that below the age of twelve are ninety percent more likely to believe in the existence of Santa."

"That's sick." General Black's eyes widened in shock. "I would never

allow something like that."

"With all due respect sir, people do it all the time. Have you ever been to a mall? I can guarantee you that every single one will have at least one 'Santa' sitting in the middle listening to children's wish lists for Christmas. This is basically the same thing, except a bit more elaborate."

General Black nodded, but was still uneasy. "Okay, so how do you intend to pull this off?"

"Preparations are already underway." Hubbard said proudly. "The train cars have been reinforced and soundproofed to the point where several ounces of C7 can blow up just a few feet away and nobody inside would feel a thing. The windows are actually special high definition image projectors designed to make the kids see what we want them to. Finally, the entire crew is staffed by specially trained ONI personnel. The train will also be stopping at Starpoint Station, where we'll join several military-grade cars onto it and task a company of Marines to protect it."

"I just hope to god this works." General Black said cautiously. "It'd be a disaster and a morale killer if anybody finds out that the Covenant managed to blow up a train full of kids on our watch."

"Just leave those details to me, General." Hubbard said in a businesslike fashion.

"Anyways, I should be going down to address the crowd. Dismissed."

After making sure the General had left the room, Hubbard took out a recording disk and spoke into it.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Ryan Hubbard reporting. I've set up everything just as you planned, down to the Marine company we're choosing to defend that train. As for informing General Black about itâ€¦ I've only told him what he needed to know," Ryan said rather diplomatically, "Our primary cargo is also being loaded as well, as well as the children. It should reach Helio in a day or two where our science teams will pick it up. Message ends."

Hubbard then inserted the disk into a secure envelope and placed it in a special drop box. The disk would be loaded onto a COM probe and then sent back to his superiors on Earth. At least, that was the plan anyways. Hubbard glanced at the rear of the train, where he caught sight of a gang of men loading a large, ominous Titanium A crate onto one of the cargo cars. Hubbard had made sure that the men loading the crate did not know of its contents, nor would they tell anybody about its existence, or the primary objective of this mission would be compromised.

Hubbard sighed. Sometimes this job was far more stressful than he would have liked. He checked his watch and realized that it was almost time to leave. He had a train to catch, after all.

**\*\*Starpoint Station\*\***

Williams and Karen both sighed as they heard shouting in the makeshift HQ set up in the train station. Karla was again in a heated debate with Captain Armbruster over proper troop deployment. Armbruster had wanted to deploy her platoon into the nearby forests and sweep them for possible Covenant activity. Karla had refused to send her platoon in, stating that it was a job for an infantry unit, on a mechanized one. The trees would force her Warthogs to bunch up into tight formations and they would be unable to use their biggest advantage, mobility.

"I don't get it." Karen sighed. "If they hate each other so much, why doesn't Captain A just transfer the Lieutenant?"

"Because she's a better commander than him and he knows it." Williams replied. "Armbruster just puts up an argument to stubbornly hide that fact."

"Oh shit, is that Major Mackenzie?" Karen pointed to a Marine striding down the hall towards the HQ.

"I think it is." Williams' HUD winked on and displayed the officers' name and rank, confirming his suspicions.

Major Mackenzie didn't even seem phased by the argument between Karla and Armbruster. He merely strode into the room and the shouting immediately halted. A few minutes passed, and then Mackenzie finally left the room with Armbruster close behind. Karla then exited the room and joined Williams and Karen.

"Grab the squad leaders and tell them to meet me at the briefing room in five." Karla told Williams.

## 2. Not Even Halfway There

"Let me tell you. In the short time that we served together, Karla Wellings was and still is the toughest and nastiest Marine I've ever known. She's no Spartan, but if there's ever a contest between her and one of those tin cans, you know who I'm putting my money on."

\_Sergeant Ronald Paccone\_

## Chapter 2: Not Even Halfway There

**\*\*Starpoint Station\*\***

"Lieutenant Hubbard." Karla narrowed her eyes suspiciously as she saw the ONI agent get off the newly arrived train. "I really shouldn't be surprised that somebody like you could have set this all up."

"We all fight wars in our own way." Hubbard said smugly. "How have you been? It's been a few years since that operation we did back on-"

"Getting back on subject." Karla cut off Hubbard. "Before we leave, I'd just like to let you know that I am not convinced that ONI would really go through all this trouble for a bunch of children. It's in my personal opinion that there's something more to this than you're telling me."

"Maybe." Hubbard shrugged.

"I'm keeping my eye on you, Ryan, and you'd better hope I don't catch you." With that, Karla broke off to pester somebody else.

Ryan winced at the remark. It had been a long time since anybody had ever called him by his first name. It was even longer to have met somebody just as intimidating as his superior. There was something about that woman that made you instinctively fear and respect her.

Meanwhile, the train the center of activity as engineer and work crews worked hastily to armor and arm the train. Additional armored cars were added, weapons were mounted, and supplies loaded. What was also special were the modified freight cars carrying D Company's Warthogs. If necessary, the Warthogs could be launched off the cars to engage possible enemies, and then recovered by a power winch similar to the kind used to carry Warthogs in Pelicans. In addition to the freight cars, two of the armored cars were armed with 90mm turrets taken from scrapped Scorpions, one possessed advanced electronic warfare/countermeasure equipment, and one had the capability to fire Archer missiles. The rest were dedicated to housing the Marines and supplies.

The extra weight was enough to nearly halve the bullet train's top speed of 300 miles per hour to only 150-200 miles per hour. A maglev train would have been faster with a top speed of 600 miles per hour, but Tau Serra was an outer colony, and didn't have the resources for such an expensive form of transportation.

The train also had it's own AI. However, Karla found it be somewhat unoriginal and dull, seeing how it was called Conductor and only talked about trains, timetables, and tickets. Conductor was rather apathetic to his passengers' plights, being more concerned with getting the train to the right destination on time and without a hitch.

That said, Karla deeply wished that she hadn't stepped foot in the train's engine.

"I really should be starting the train right now." Conductor said flatly. "I was not told of the extra weight that we would be taking on. The speed reduction simply does not fit with the prearranged schedule-"

"Shut up, Conductor," Karla growled, "or I'll rip your data crystal out and chuck it off the tracks. I haven't operated a train manually before, but if an AI like you is running it, it really can't be that hard."

Conductor harrumphed in annoyance, clearly offended. "Then I'll just have to revise my timetable."

"You do that." Karla sighed as she exited the train engine. At least the AI was smart enough to know when to call it quits.

"Well, I just received word that everything is loaded and ready." Hubbard announced as Karla walked past him. "We're ready when you are."

"I want to see them."

Hubbard raised an eyebrow in confusion and asked, "Who?"

"The children of course." She replied.

"I'm afraid that we can only let cleared personnel-" Hubbard stopped when he caught Karla's stare. "Ummmm, five minutes."

**\*\*Passenger Section\*\***

Karla was a little envious of the children she saw the moment she entered the first passenger car. They were all laughing and playing while very tired ONI service personnel were catering their needs. In here at least, there was no war against the Covenant, or the dismal prospect of the extinction of humanity.

It almost made Karla wish she was ten again.

"Do you know where Kyle is?"

Karla nearly jumped in surprise and looked down to see a ten year old girl tugging at her sleeve. She had long, unkept black hair and big blue puppy eyes that would melt the iron heart of any Marine.

"I'm sorry, what?" Karla bent down so that she could see the girl eye to eye.

"My brother, Kyle." The girl said simply. "He left home dressed like you. I thought that maybe you knew where he was."

That figures. It meant that this Kyle was a Marine at the very least. Karla responded, "I might. What's your name?"

"Lyn." The girl said cheerfully, "Lyn Hannever."

"Well, I'm sorry Lyn, but I'm afraid I haven't seen your brother anywhere yet."

"Ohâ€|" Lyn's eyes darkened for a moment, but they brightened back when she continued, "But I'm sure that I'll see him soon. I told Santa I wanted to see him again, and that it wouldn't matter if I got any presents or anything."

"Well, I hope you get your wish." Karla said cheerfully, reminding herself to kill Hubbard some day.

"Do you have any Christmas wishes for Santa?" Lyn asked.

The question caused Karla to pause for a bit. She had never taken the existence of Santa seriously, but how would she actually admit that to a ten year old? But then again, there were quite a few things Karla would like to have happen.

"Well, I guess my wish is kind of like yours, Lyn. I really wish that I could get to see some of my friends again." Karla thought of Merl, Matt, Peterson, Silks, and the twenty-four other Marines of 3rd Platoon who would never see home again.



"Well, I hope your wish comes true." Lyn smiled.

Karla was about to respond when a teddy bear hit her in the face. By the time Karla picked it up and handed it back to a red-headed boy with freckles, Lyn was already several seats down pestering an ONI service staff member.

"Time's up." Hubbard said, looking at his watch. "We really should be going now."

**\*\*Starpoint Station\*\***

Like a sleeping, primeval beast, Train 98C slowly came to life and pulled itself from the station. The parents lined up across the edges of the platforms waved their last, tearful goodbyes as the train shot forward and disappeared into the morning mist.

**\*\*UNSC Freight Courier \_Mississippi**  
> <em>\*\*\*December 15, 2551 (UNSC standard)  
> <strong>\*\*Currently in high orbit\*\*

Captain Lee Hitomi sat back and sighed as his ship slowly tried to claw its way out of the planet's gravity well. Unlike many of the shiny new and modern UNSC warships floating around in orbit, the \_Mississippi\_ was a creaky leaky tub with engines bolted onto her. The ship justified her own existence in the fact that it was good at ferrying large amounts of cargo short distances, like from the planet's surface to an orbiting ship.

This time around, he was hauling several tons of food and a Shiva nuclear warhead up to the UNSC destroyer \_Alma\_. This wasn't the first time Hitomi had carried dangerous cargo, so he didn't really mind the fact that he was carrying a weapon that could turn an entire city into a pile of irradiated rubble.

"You really should be more attentive to your duties, Captain." Cyrene said in an annoyed tone.

Cyrene was the ship's AI, a basic class-C that could really only handle simple tasks such as running cargo ships and Slipspace calculations. Like his cargo, Hitomi didn't really take her too seriously except as a source of conversation.

"It's just like the last hundred times we made this run, and the next hundred times won't be much different." Hitomi leaned back in his chair. "Besides, it's not like we can run into bad weather or turbulence or anything. We're way above the weather patterns and there's not enough air to really cause problems.

Suddenly, the entire ship shuddered as if it were struck by a giant sledgehammer. The lights flickered and warning sirens wailed.

"What's going on?!" Hitomi yelled.

"I don't know, sir!" One of Hitomi's crewmembers responded. "We've got sudden hull breaches and fires in the engine compartment! None of the engineering crews are responding!"

Cyrene suddenly spoke up. "Captain, I'm receiving battle data over the E-band. It looks like a large Covenant fleet has entered the system and is sending in numerous dropships and fighters. We are currently being assaulted by a squadron of Seraphs, and the dropships will be within boarding range in two minutes."

"Shit." Hitomi breathed. It was the only thing he could think of saying.

"This ship's computer and my memory core contain data that is too sensitive for the Covenant to gain a hold of." Cyrene continued. "Under the Cole Protocol, subsection C, I have taken the initiative and activated the Shiva nuclear warhead in cargo bay one to detonate in sixty seconds, unless you would like me to cancel the action."

Hitomi mulled over the decision for a second. Dying in a ball of nuclear fire wasn't exactly the way he planned to buy the farm. On the other hand, if that meant the Covenant couldn't get the nav data in his ships' computer, then so be it. At least he'd be able to one patriotic thing his life.

Besides, he'd probably be able to take a few hundred of those bastards to Hell with him.

"Keep the countdown going, Cyrene. I've got no regrets."

"Confirmed. Detonation in thirty-three point two seconds. Oh, and Captain," Cyrene hesitated for a moment, as if embarrassed. "it- it's been an honor serving with you."

Hitomi patted his control console. "Same to you, Cyrene."

Train 98C, "The Polar Express"

Karla flinched as a second sun tore its way into existence in Tau Serra's night sky. She could hear Williams and Karen cursing as they were blinded by the sudden flash. By the time her sight could adjust to the sudden change in lighting, Karla noticed that everything was pitch black. All her armor's systems, the lights around her, and the train itself were black and dead.

Suddenly, Karla's HUD slowly hummed to life. Small holographic letters suddenly began to form.

ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE DETECTED. ATTEMPTING SYSTEM  
RESTART++

Fortunately for the Marines, EMP hardening and protection was standard among all military and UNSC equipment, which meant that damage would be minimized. Unfortunately, most civilian equipment did not follow such rigorous standards and were vulnerable to being totally fried.

The moment her radio came back online, Karla contacted the engine.

"Control, what's going on?"

"It seems like we've got a massive EMP." Hubbard replied. Karla could

hear Armbruster's panicked blubbering in the background. "The train's systems are completely dead, or at least the engine is. Any idea what caused it?"

"Well, there was this bright flash in the skyâ€¦"

"A nuclear blast in high orbit. That means the Covenant have arrived." Hubbard's voice did not seem surprised at all.

"Control, this is the Sensor Wagon." Being an ECM car, it wasn't surprising to see that the communications car to have their systems back up so fast. "We're picking up multiple bogies incoming at our position."

"How far?" Hubbard asked.

"ETA two minutes."

"How long till we get the engine back up and running?" Karla asked.

"Uhhh, Conductor is saying at least five."

"Tell him he's got only one." Karla turned to the rest of the Marines on the train. She couldn't afford to wait for Armbruster to give the order. "Everybody, get to your positions! All kinds of hell is coming this way and if it wants to get here, its gotta get through us Marines!"

With a series of enthusiastic "Hoo-ah!"s, the Marines of D Company quickly rallied and began manning defensive positions.

"Control, I hope you've got some good news for me."

"We're still working on it." Hubbard said anxiously. "But it looks like you're going to be earning your pay on this one."

Karla could now see the distant blue flickers of Covenant plasma engines. They were going to be in range any second now.

"Missile control, you are clear to fire!" Armbruster yelled through the radio.

At the rear of the train, there was a sudden geyser of fire as an Archer missile pulled itself free from its launch rack. The telephone pole-sized projectile rocketed through the air and sped toward the oncoming squadron of Covenant craft. The distant orange flare combined with one of the flickering blue lights and instantly turned into a white ball of fire, bright as the stars behind it.

"That's a confirmed hit." The sensor officer reported.

Two more Archer missiles hit their targets before the flight of Covenant aircraft reached the inside of the missiles' effective minimum range. Karla could now see at least six Covenant dropships and a pair of Banshees closing in on the train.

Almost simultaneously, every single rifle, cannon, and rocket fired at the oncoming alien craft. Bright lances of tracer fire and rocket trails slammed into the line of dropships like a wall. Both Banshees

disintegrated into ash while three of the dropships plummeted to the ground like rocks. The final three dropships, not expecting so much resistance, quickly backed off and retreated to the safety of high orbit.

"I hope you're finished, Hubbard." Karla said. "That's not going to work twice."

"You've got nothing to worry about."

Slowly but surely, the lights on the train began to flicker back to life. The engine slowly hummed and the entire train began to pick up momentum.

"You think we scared them off?" Karen looked out into the empty sky.

"No, not a chance." Karla leaned back against her Warthog. "They'll be back, and in greater numbers. It's like clockwork."

"Wonderful."

### 3. Gone From Us

"\_Wander my friends, wander with me\_

\_Like the mist on the green mountain, moving eternally  
>Despite our weariness<br>we'll follow the road  
>Over hill and valleys<br>to the end of the journey\_

\_Come on my friends and sing with me  
>Fill the night with joy and sport<br>Here's a toast to the friends  
who have gone from us  
>Like the mist of the green mountain,<br>gone foreverâ€|"\_

\_-Gaelic song (translated) composed by Bear McCreary\_

### Chapter 3: Gone From Us

**\*\*December 17, 2551\*\***

Two days had passed since the Covenant had made landfall. The train should have made it to Helios, but it was barely even at the halfway point. Due to the EMP blast, a lot of the train's control systems had been fried, and the engines suffered the most. Now, the train could barely top sixty miles per hour. It was so slow, that the Warthogs could easily keep pace with it, which is exactly what they did. In order to reduce the weight and to better respond to possible Covenant attacks, Armbruster deployed all of the Warthogs being stored on the train. They now flanked the train as it wove its way through the snowed in countryside.

Meanwhile, on the overall front, the Covenant thankfully unable to land troops in significant numbers. Their main fleet was still slugging it out with the defending Navy fleet and too busy fighting to disgorge troops. The few that did were scattered around the planet, and local forces were quickly dealing with them. Since the initial attack, nobody had seen another Covenant force.

"I'm starting to like this assignment." Williams said as he leaned back in his seat. "For once we're not being shot at."

"Don't write it off just yet." Karla muttered. "I'm getting that feeling again."

"I hope you're talking about the feeling that we're going to make it to the end of this mission alive and in on piece."

"No, it's the feeling that something will go horribly horribly wrong and that we're going to have to deal with it."

"I hate it when you say that." Williams said glumly.

"Uh, guys," Karen pointed up to the sky, "I think we've got company."

As if to confirm it, the Sensor Wagon buzzed in said, "We've got contacts two klicks south and closing. Looks like dropships and Banshees."

Just as Karla thought, more Covenant were on their way.

"Heading?"

"The dropships are dropping off the sensors like flies. Looks like they're making landings south of us, but the Banshees are still headed our way."

"Numbers?"

"About twenty."

Karla nodded. Well, that was what Warthog LAAGs were for. She surveyed the available Warthogs. There were eight in all, since there wasn't enough space to fit the entire company's Warthog complement.

"Two, Four, and Five, this is One. Break formation and form up with me. We're going to head off those Banshees."

"Roger that, One."

Three LAAG armed Warthogs immediately broke off from their flanking formations and closed in on Karla's Warthog, which was already headed straight for the Banshees. Though they were still out of the range, the LAAG gunners immediately started firing to break up the Banshees' tight formation. Seeing the tracers zipping towards them, the Banshee pilots panicked and scattered, leaving them vulnerable to the Marines sitting in the Warthogs armed with M19 rocket launchers. Two of the Banshees exploded and fell to the ground in pieces. Combined cannon fire brought down three more before the Banshees managed to regroup and return fire. Plasma fire stitched the ground as the Banshees tried to track the Warthogs.

By this time, the fight began to gravitate toward the train, putting the Banshees in range of its defensive batteries. Heavy machine gun and cannon fire knocked a pair of Banshees out of the air. Whether by

incredible luck or precision, one of the 90mm turrets struck a Banshee square on, scattering its remains for miles.

However, the other twelve Banshees rushed forward to brave the gauntlet of fire, heading straight for the engine. Half of them were shot down in the hail of gunfire, but the remaining half dozen managed to break through. They began to line up on the engine, fuel rods glowing green in preparation to fire.

"Shit." Karla growled and footed the accelerator.

The Warthog shot forward in an attempt to catch up the Banshees. Williams fired two M19 rockets in quick succession, bringing down the lead Banshee and buying the engine a few more seconds. Karen kept a stream of tracers flying at the remaining Banshees, but they were too determined to finish their objective to break off. For a second, Karla thought that the engine was gone for until missiles and streams of tracer fire slammed into the side of the Banshees. In just seconds, the entire formation dissolved into pieces of falling purple debris.

Karla was at first confused until a scant few seconds later, when a flight of four Navy Longswords streaked overhead. They circled around for several seconds to make sure there weren't any targets left, and when they were satisfied, wagged their wings and disappeared into the clouds.

Karla fought the urge to laugh in disbelief. By some grace of good fortune, a Longsword flight just happened to be passing by and decided to help out. The Longswords probably didn't know what the train or its escorts were doing, but they knew that they were fellow Marines in trouble and was enough to convince them to commit.

As if to confirm that the battle was over, the sky darkened and it started to snow again, as if the planet itself were trying to cover up the burning remains of the twenty dead Banshees scattered all over the countryside.

**\*\*December 20, 2551\*\***

Karla was almost dead from fatigue. For the past three days, she and the rest of D Company had been repeatedly fighting off waves of Banshees. Though they were easily dealt with, the effects of the constant attack were beginning to be felt. Many of the Marines, Karla included, were extremely fatigued and tired out from being on constant alert for attacks. There were significant amounts of plasma scoring and damage along the surfaces of the train, and two Warthogs and five Marines had already been lost.

To make things worse, the engineers were still unable to fix the bugs caused by the EMP burst. The train's speed was still crippled and it would very frequently break down, extending their already prolonged schedule by days. Short of a complete overhaul, the engineers couldn't find any other way to fix the train.

About the only people on the train who weren't affected by any of this were the children. Thanks to some clever psychological and physical manipulation, many of the children weren't even aware that the train was several days overdue. Masterful adjusting of the train's internal clock and lighting served to trick the children into

thinking only a day or so had passed. Karla didn't know how those ONI spooks did it, but they certainly knew what they were doing.

Ironically, the only place where Karla could get any decent rest was inside the childrens' cars. She had long figured out a way to get past the ONI guards at the door, and she would take a car full of noisy and obnoxious children over Armbruster any day.

"You know, contrary to the Laws of Nature, I'm pretty sure you used to be one of them once."

"Huh?" Karla turned to see Hubbard standing next to her. "What do you mean?"

"A kid." Hubbard shrugged. "Though the way you act, sometimes I think you came out of the womb the way you are right now."

Karla sighed. "What are you doing here anyways?"

"Like you, I really get tired of officers who like to hear themselves talk."

Karla couldn't help but grin. Though she didn't want to admit it, she and Hubbard were fairly similar in some ways.

"So, do you have any idea why the Covenant want to stop this train so badly?" Karla asked, in a tone as if she already knew the answer.

"I really have no idea."

"You mean, you don't know because you don't want to tell me."

"Something like that."

"Well Hubbard," Karla stretched her arms, "what I do know is that the Covenant want to get to this train very badly because of the countless suicide runs they've made, and that they want to stop the train instead of destroy it because so far, they've only been focusing on the engine."

"Well, who knows what the alien minds of the Covenant are thinking?"

Karla smiled, "I thought that was your job, Lieutenant."

"Touche." Hubbard smiled back. "Anyways, I'll be heading off to the Sensor Wagon now. I have a few calls to make."

Karla watched Hubbard disappear through the door and felt a very familiar tugging at her sleeve.

"Have you seen my brother yet?" Lyn asked.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't." Karla answered innocently. "Must have just missed him."

"I asked that other man too, but he didn't know either. He was really nice, though."

Karla laughed. "Ryan is a lot of things to a lot of people. Being nice is one of the few things that keep me from beating him up."

Lyn's eyes widened in alarm. "Wouldn't that put you on Santa's naughty list?"

"I guess, though I'm not exactly the nicest person you could ever meet."

Lyn smiled. "Karen said you would say something like that."

Like Karla, Karen had something of a soft spot for kids, and had also found a way past the apparently incompetent ONI guards at the car door. She basically snuck in whenever she wasn't on patrol, which was quite common. Karla couldn't blame her. A lot of Marines had to maintain their sanity in their own little ways.

"Lieutenant." Conductor's voice buzzed through Karla's radio.

"What is it?"

"I suggest you come to the engine right now. It is quite urgent."

**\*\*Engine\*\***

In the cramped confines of the engineers' lounge, Karla, Armbruster, Hubbard, and a couple of other officers sat around a tactical map.

"Okay, first, the good news." Hubbard said, "As of six hours ago, the Navy has claimed total air superiority over Tau Serra. Through some magnificent tactical maneuvering (suicidal, Karla thought), the Navy fleet has managed to drive the Covenant force out of the system, at least for the time being. That means no more dropships or Covenant reinforcements."

There was a small and weak chorus of cheers around the table.

"However," Hubbard coughed, "the Covenant still have a very large ground presence on the planet, and that's where the bad news starts."

Hubbard activated the map, which began to display a holographic view of the surrounding area. A single green dot represented the train as it was slowly moving.

"That's us." Hubbard pointed at the green dot. "And that's the nearest Covenant ground force as of three days ago."

Hubbard then pointed to a large mass of red dots clustered on the other side of the map. That pretty much meant that they wouldn't be seeing that Covenant force for a while.

"Satellite scans showed that area as the main LZ for the Covenant dropships. Estimates range from one to two thousand troops with armor support. Of course, this was just three days ago. Here's a scan that



was taken just twelve hours ago."

The tactical map blurred as it updated the information. Suddenly, the red cluster jumped from the other side of the map to just a few dozen miles behind the train. The cluster was also significantly larger.

"Apparently, the Covenant also landed additional forces during that three day window. The first force is only the spearhead. Behind them is an additional four thousand Covenant."

Everybody in the room gaped in disbelief. Few armies had the will or means to move so many troops so far and so fast.

"That's several hundred miles between us and them, and they covered it in just a few days." Lieutenant Burt Andrews gasped, "They would have to have been moving at full speed all day and night to catch up."

"The Covenant have proven to be incredibly fanatic to get what they want." Hubbard said, "I've seen them sacrifice entire fleets on the off chance that they could recover an artifact of religious significance to them. Case in point, they want this train destroyed and very badly."

"What about reinforcements?" Armbruster asked, "I doubt General Black would just leave us to the wolves."

"Unfortunately, this isn't the only landing the Covenant have made on the planet. There are multiple, smaller landings all over the continent and the Marines are tied up dealing with them. Also, the majority of our forces are committed to protecting the population centers. Even if they mobilized now, there's no way they could reach us in time. However, the Navy has seen our plight and is sending Longswords to bomb and harass the Covenant. They might buy us enough time; they might not. The thing is, things will get ugly and they will get ugly fast."

"Sir!" A Marine burst into the room. "We've got Covenant bearing down on us! Looks like Ghosts, and lots of them!"

Immediately, the Marines scrambled out of the engine to deploy their troops. Within minutes, Karla and her five remaining Warthogs were already on the ground and moving to meet the incoming tide of over sixty Ghosts. Karla had no idea how six Warthogs would hold off over ten times their number in enemy vehicles, and she wished she wasn't in the position to have to find out for herself.

Already, Karla could hear the distant thumping of 90mm cannon fire as high explosive shells rained down on the oncoming Ghost formations. Like a shoal of fish, the Ghosts broke up and scattered as explosions ripped several unlucky comrades to pieces. The oncoming Warthogs kept up the pressure on the Ghosts with their LAAGs, showering them with a storm of 30mm rounds.

The Ghosts returned fire as well. Williams winced and ducked as plasma bolts struck the Warthog's armored hood. Karen swung her turret around as the Ghosts flew past them. If the Warthogs had one advantage, it was that their turrets afforded them a full three hundred sixty degrees of coverage, while the Ghosts with their

nose-mounted plasma cannons had a much narrower field of fire. Around a dozen Ghosts crashed and burned as 30mm rounds ripped into their unprotected backs.

However, the Ghosts completely ignored the Warthogs and made a beeline straight for the struggling train. Small arms fire from the Marine garrison began to track the Covenant vehicles. The barking of assault rifles, the roar of rocket launchers, and the popping sound of sniper rifles could be heard in the distance as the slower Warthogs tried to catch up with the Ghosts.

The battle continued for another grueling five minutes, with Ghosts and Warthogs weaving through and around each other as they tried to jockey for position around the train. One of the Warthogs was struck by plasma fire and its front tire evaporated. The vehicle spun out and shuddered to a stop. The crew of the downed Warthog continued to fire, but without any mobility, it would only be a matter of time before they were torn apart by the Ghosts. The train certainly wouldn't stop for a single downed Warthog, especially with a fleet of Ghosts harassing it, so it was up to the other Warthogs to help.

"Three, Four, pick them up. We'll cover you." Karla ordered.

Immediately, the two Warthogs circled around and moved to rescue the stranded Marines. Karla had her Warthog move around the stationary Warthogs in order to draw the fire away from the rescuers. By this time, the Ghosts were beginning to thin out and many decided it was best to try again some other day. However, a few diehards decided to stay behind and figured that taking out a group of helpless Marines would be a good consolation prize. Three Ghosts veered off from the main group and made a beeline straight for the wrecked Warthog.

"Williams, Karen, take those Ghosts out!" Karla yelled as she swung the Warthog around.

Williams fired a pair of M19 rockets at the oncoming trio of Ghosts. The first rocket was too high and spiraled into the air. The second rocket hit dead center, spraying dirty snow, Ghost parts, and pieces of steaming Elite all over the ground. Karen nailed the second Ghost with the 30mm cannon. The Ghost tried to evade, but Karen had the mounted weapon locked on, and the Ghost was torn to pieces under the fusillade.

However, the final Ghost managed to close the distance and pulled up alongside the Warthog. Karla gasped and ducked as the Elite driver raised a Needler and starting pumping the side of the Warthog full of explosive needles. Needler rounds sparked and flared as they ricocheted off of the Warthog's armored plating. Throwing the spent M19 aside, Williams rose up from his seat and fired his assault rifle at the Ghost. Though none of the rounds penetrated the Elite's shields, the bullets ripped up the Ghost's control panel, causing the vehicle to nosedive into the ground. The entire Ghost flipped over and crushed the Elite under its enormous weight.

Karla quickly looked around. Warthogs Three and Four had already picked up their charges and there were no Ghosts in sight.

"Everybody okay?" She asked.

"Still alive." Williams said.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I screwed up." Karen coughed.

"What?" Karla turned around and saw Karen's condition. "Oh Jesus!"

It turned out that some of the Needler rounds had found their marks. Karen was slumped over the Warthog's gun, hands clutched over her torn abdomen.

"Shit, Williams, help her out."

Williams nodded and climbed over to the Warthog's rear section, first aid kit in hand. He unhooked Karen from her safety harness and laid her down. He then quickly sprayed the wound with biofoam and closed it up with a fibrin bandage.

"How does it look?" Karla asked, having to keep her eyes on the road.

"It's bad, real bad." Williams said, "We have to get to a doctor fast. She's gut-shot."

Karla grimaced. With the complexity of human intestines and digestive system, most Marines and medics didn't even try to touch major gut wounds. Most of the time, they just filled the cavity with biofoam and hoped that the wounded would stay alive long enough to get to an actual surgeon. Karen's chances so far didn't look so good. She had already lost a lot of blood, and biofoam could only do so much.

"Is this what dying feels like? Because it really sucks." Karen groaned, coughing up blood.

"Don't worry Karen, we're almost back at the train. We can get a doctor to help you." Williams tried to comfort Karen.

"Hey look," Karen stared at the sky, as if she didn't hear what Williams said, 'it's snowing again.'

Indeed, snowflakes began floating down, the first signs of a coming storm.

"Just stay with us, Karen, we're almost there." Karla said.

"Yeah, and once we get you to Doctor Pennert, he'll fix you up, good as new. He managed to sew up the Lieutenant every time she decided to intercept a plasma bolt or two."

Karen smiled, "I'm sure he did."

She was silent for a while. Karla began to fear the worst when Karen suddenly spoke again.

"L-lieutenant, is this the first time you've ever lost anybody?"

"No, I've lost more than you can ever imagine."

"Do you? Do you ever get used to it?" Karen asked. "Was there ever a time where you just didn't feel anything?"

Karla didn't even hesitate in her answer. "Never. It's not something you can easily forget."

"Okay." Karen sounded relieved, and then suddenly changed the subject. "What do you think we'll do after all this? I mean, after this war ends?"

"Well, we'll most definitely find the most expensive bar on whatever planet we happen to be on, you and Williams will get uproariously drunk and insult a bunch of Navy boys, and then I'd have to come and save both your sorry asses."

Karen gave a weak laugh. "Yeah, I can imagine that happening."

Karla and Williams continued to engage Karen in small talk. They were trying to keep her active and awake, since they feared what would happen if they ever let her doze off. It took another five minutes for the Warthog to catch up with the train, and another three to load it up onto the cargo sled.

By that time, Private First Class Karen Sykes was already dead.

#### 4. End of the Line

"What's life? I'll tell you what life is. Life is just one endless pile of crap with a few pleasant memories sprinkled in for good measure. But you know what? It's not all that bad, because no matter how deep you are in that pile of crap, it's all worth it for those few good moments, because it always gives you the hope that there will be another one at the end of the tunnel. Doesn't sound very encouraging? Well too bad, because that's life. Live with it."

-Drill Sergeant William Pickering-

#### Chapter 4: End of the Line

**\*\*December 21, 2006\*\***

Karla did not have a single moment of rest for the entire night. She just couldn't sleep. Karen had only been in the company for two weeks, yet she somehow managed to worm herself into the place Karla often reserved for her closest friends and fellow Marines.

Karla was sure of this because she had spent the last five hours trying to clean Karen's blood from her Warthog, and was still cleaning it long after the last drop was gone.

What she hated the most, however, was having to explain why Karen wasn't around to Lyn. When asked, Karla replied, trying to keep her voice steady, "Karen just decided to take a trip for a little while. She should be back real soon."

"Oh, then I guess I'll wait." Lyn smiled, "I just wanted to ask her

about that big black box."

"What?" Karla was suddenly alert, all of her fatigue washed away in an instant.

Lyn's eyes drifted down to the floor, as if admitting to a crime. "I know I wasn't supposed to, but I snuck out of the car and I saw this big black box in one of the other cars. I tried to see what was inside, but I couldn't open it."

Suddenly, everything seemed to be coming together. Karla stood up and made her way to the door.

"Sorry Lyn, but I have something to do."

Karla caught Hubbard coming back from the Sensor Wagon. Before he knew it, Hubbard caught a fist in the gut and found himself sprawled all over the floor with Karla glaring down at him menacingly.

"I suppose this isn't about Christmas presents." Hubbard coughed.

"Let's make this simple." Karla bent down and grabbed Hubbard by the collar. "You're going to tell me what this mission is really about, and then I'll beat the crap out of you. Got it?"

"Isn't it supposed to be that I tell you and you don't beat me up?"

"No, then I'll fucking kill you." Karla glared murderously at Hubbard.

"Okay, okay." Hubbard sighed, as if he had expected this to happen. "Tell me what you know first, since I know you dislike repetition."

"Well, I know that the Covenant want to get onto this train very badly to the point of suicide, and I doubt it's just for a bunch of children. Also, there's the matter of a strange box in one of the storage cars that doesn't seem to be on any of the manifests, and therefore technically does not exist. Coincidence?"

"I guess I can't put anything past you." Hubbard smiled before receiving a sharp kick. "You're right. Transporting the children wasn't the only objective for this mission."

"So, what? Are you transporting another one of those infamous little 'artifacts' that I've been hearing so much about? That alien tech that the Covenant seem so keen to try and get?"

"Ha ha, funny story about that, actually." Hubbard laughed. "There isn't actually an 'artifact' on this train at all. Well, at least the Covenant doesn't think that."

Karla raised an eyebrow. "Explain. Now."

"It'd be a lot easier if your boot wasn't pressing on my throat."

Karla calmly lifted her boot and pulled Hubbard up roughly by the

collar.

"Okay, I guess I'll explain." Hubbard shifted his eyes left and right. "Just don't tell anybody that I did, okay? If my boss finds out, he'll be pissed, and whenever he does people get 'disappeared'."

"I'm hurt, Hubbard. I thought you learned that you could trust me."

"Enough to let me live?"

"We'll see."

"Okay, maybe a little backstory will help. Do you remember World War II, over six centuries ago?"

Karla rolled her eyes. "As does every officer whos taken Military History 101."

"Yes, well anyways, during the preparations for D-Day, the ONI equivalent of the time period pulled off a major intelligence coup. They planted the body of a British officer in German territory. Everything about the officer looked authentic. He had a name and rank, a background, and even love letters from a fictional girlfriend. However, he also had information on the upcoming invasion, except it told the Germans all the wrong things. It made them think that the invasion would occur in a completely different area. It was instrumental in the success of D-Day."

The truth suddenly began to dawn on Karla.

"We're just decoys." Karla whispered.

"Yeah, now I see why I didn't really want to tell-"

"You bastard!"

Hubbard toppled to the ground, with a substantial number of cuts and bruises to his face.

"Is that what we are? Cannon fodder? I can understand if it's just us Marines, since that's how you ONI spooks view us all anyways, but those kids?" She delivered another swift blow to Hubbard's face. "You've hit a new low, Hubbard."

Karla had trouble keeping her rage in check, and for a brief second, thought that she was actually going to kill the ONI agent. Fortunately for Hubbard, Karla managed to find the restraint to stop beating on Hubbard.

"Well, why'd you think I chose you and your unit?" Hubbard coughed. "We've been keeping track of your combat record, Karla, and we've found out some very interesting things, such as ever since that little fiasco on Sera Gamma, every unit you've ever been with, whether organized or ad hoc, has had the success of having a fifty percent casualty rate or less. Plus, we needed a determined and experienced unit to keep the Covenant thinking there was something actually valuable on this train, and General Black would never release such a unit to an empty train, so, I had to

improvise."

"Just so you could distract the majority of the attacking Covenant force and keep them chasing us rather than attacking the cities and impeding the evacuations." Karla sighed, "I don't know whether I should punch you again or shake your hand."

**\*\*Engine\*\***

"Things aren't looking so good." Hubbard said as he pointed to the tactical map. He had several small bandages on his face and some of the bruises were still visible, though nobody bothered to ask any questions. "At this rate, the Covenant advance is going to catch up with us in just a few hours. We need the better part of another half day in order to reach Helios, which meansâ€¦"

"A rearguard action." Karla finished the sentence. She was all too familiar with such situations.

"That's right." Hubbard nodded. "Unfortunately, since we're in open country, and with our small numbers the Covenant can easily just outflank us."

The gathered officers murmured nervously. It seemed as if their mission was destined to fail.

"Fortunately, it looks like we have our own little holiday miracle here." Hubbard continued and pointed at the map, "Right here is the Gryphon Point Bridge. It spans a ravine that's about a hundred meters deep, which means that it's beyond the capability of Covenant vehicles to hover over. What we do is that we leave a small force to hold the bridge for as long as possible, and destroy it when it looks as if it can no longer be defended. With that ravine between us and them, it should give whoever's left enough time to fall back and catch up with the train."

"How's that?" One of the officers asked. "There's no road that follows alongside the tracks at that point and the terrain up there is all mountains, so it'll be pretty treacherous."

"There are quite a few abandoned mining tunnels in the mountains here. Using them, anybody can cut straight through that mountain range and hook up with the train at the other side, which is basically where Helios is."

"I think we've got a plan then." Karla said, "Let's do it."

**\*\*Gryphon Point Bridge\*\***

"Well, you can see my surprise when I've been ordered to defend this bridge against 'light Covenant elements', only to find out that translates into several thousand of them." Captain Meryn Wane grumbled.

Captain Wane was the commanding officer of a platoon of roughly fifty Marines designated to hold the town of Gyphon Point. Really, from what all Karla could see, the town's only object of strategic importance was the bridge. The town itself wasn't too much to brag about either. It was just a small, shabby mining town that had long

been abandoned due to the impending invasion. Karla wasn't surprised that there was such a small Marine garrison here. In actual truth, Wane and his soldiers were only Marines in name only. They were technically only local military defense forces, not part of any official UNSC Marine unit.

"We've probably got only two hours until the leading elements of the Covenant force reach us." Karla said, "We're going to need to compare notes and get a workable defense for this bridge up and running."

Over the next two hours, Captain Wane and Karla worked feverishly to make the bridge and the town around it into a defensible position. The strongest and most strategically placed structures were turned into miniature fortresses, two 120mm howitzers were dug in on the far end of the bridge for antitank purposes, fire trenches and hastily constructed bunkers were erected to fill the gaps in the line, and heavy weapons and ammo were distributed in various caches littered around the town. Karla had roughly two platoons of one hundred Marines, co-commanded by Lieutenant Vizer, manning positions on the front lines. Wane deployed his fifty Marines on the far end of the bridge to man the howitzers and provide covering fire in the event that Karla's unit had to fall back.

On the logistical side, Gryphon Point had no shortage of vehicles the Marines could use to get out of the town. Various trucks were prepped and positioned for quick loading and escape. Karla herself had three Warthogs taken from the train.

Of course, engineers and sappers planted C7 charges all over the bridge to ensure that it would be completely destroyed. Wane was given control of the detonator.

Finally, when all the Marines could possibly do was done, Karla had one more request to makeâ€¦

**\*\*Two Miles Outside Gryphon Point\*\***

Mela Kazanee hated snow. Like many of the Unngoy under his command, Kazanee disliked cold climates. It made soldiers sluggish and uncomfortable, and generally slowed everything down. Fortunately, most of his force was mechanized so he didn't have to worry about slogging through the disgusting muck on foot.

"Commander, we've found something." One of his scouts reported.

"What is it?"

"It appears that the humans have left behind one of their cargo modules. We're not sure if the Relic is in there, but our scanners show a weak energy signature emanating from it."

"Hold your position." Kazanee grinned. "Wait for the rest of the unit to catch up and we will determine for ourselves."

**\*\*Gryphon Point\*\***

"Are they falling for it?" Karla asked?



"Like flies to the feast." The young Marine sitting next to her replied.

Karla glanced at the Marine and checked her name. The IFF tag identified her as PVT. RICHARDS. She was one of Wane's scouts, supposedly one of his best, even though she had barely been a Marine for a year. She was acting as a liaison to help spot for the howitzers on the other side of the ravine. Karla wasn't sure what to make of her yet, but she had a feeling that Tarin Richards would make a fine Marine if she managed to live through this.

"Should we do it?" Williams asked, ready to press the electronic trigger he was holding.

"Just wait a second." Tarin whispered as she looked through her binoculars, "There's more of them gathering around it."

"Anytime now!" Williams said anxiously.

"Now!" Tarin yelled.

Williams pulled the trigger.

Two miles away, the five Archer missiles the abandoned train car was carrying exploded. The car was essentially reduced to a massive fragmentation grenade as flying shrapnel shredded Covenant and vehicle alike. Once the smoke cleared, over fifty Covenant were either dead or injured and about a dozen vehicles were out of commission.

"All guns, fire at position alpha. Fire for effect!" Tarin yelled in her radio.

There was the distant thumping as the twin 120mm howitzers began lobbing high explosive shells into the advancing Covenant. Karla could see Grunts and Elites scattering as the falling shells exploded around them.

The Covenant, now aware that they were under attack, began to press forward with all of the force they could muster. The line of Covenant vehicles began to close in, firing plasma bolts wildly.

"All units fire!" Karla yelled.

The next two hours was a flurry of activity. Covenant and human forces exchanged withering fire. By the time Covenant ground forces reached the edge of the town, they were already climbing walls of dead Covenant and burnt hulks of vehicles. The Marines managed to hold off the Covenant for nearly three hours, but the structures they were taking shelter in could only take so much punishment. It was only a matter of time before massed Wraith bombardments found their marks, annihilating the majority of the Marine positions and killing or wounding around thirty Marines.

Karla noticed the huge gaps in the line and decided to make the call.

"All units, fall back to the other side of the bridge! Wane! We need some covering fire!"

As if in response, a stream of tracer fire shot across the ravine and slammed into the advancing Covenant, forcing them back in surprise. Meanwhile, the surviving Marines began falling back across the bridge, with a few of them staying behind as a rearguard. Karla noticed that Tarin was among one them, and even though she was still a private, she was directing and guiding Marines with the air of a true and tried officer. With just seven other Marines, Tarin managed to organize a formation to held off a wave of Covenant that outnumbered her by five times. By then, the last of the Marines had fallen back, and an expertly placed howitzer round managed to buy her time to fall back.

"You know," Karla said as she ducked into Wane's fire trench, "that Tarin really knows her stuff. I can see a battlefield commission in her future."

"Well, if we all live through this, I'll see what I can do." Wane responded.

Suddenly, a Wraith plasma mortar fell and scored a direct hit on one of the howitzers, melting the gun into slag and killing all but one of the four man crew manning it.

"Shit." Wane said as he realized their antitank capability had just been halved. "I don't think we'll be able to hold for much longer. The Covenant are starting to snowball at the other end which means more massed fire."

As if to reinforce his point, more plasma mortars rained down, demolishing one of the Marine strongpoints and taking Lieutenant Vizer and fifteen Marines with it. Meanwhile, more Wraiths were making a push down the bridge with dozens of Covenant infantry flanking them. The last howitzer was destroying the lead tanks as fast as it could, but every time a Wraith was destroyed, the one behind it quickly pushed the destroyed hulk aside and continued on.

"It looks like we have no choice. Blow the bridge and fall back. I just hope we bought enough time."

Wane nodded and yelled, "FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

The other Marines heard the exclamation and quickly ran to get as much distance between them and the bridge as possible. Wane gave them several seconds and then activated the detonator.

It took several seconds, but the C7 charges did their jobs, blowing out the bridge's vital supports. The entire structure literally crumpled like paper and fell to the bottom of the ravine, taking dozens of Covenant and vehicles with it. More units at the edge attempted to stop, but the pressure of the oncoming forces behind them tragically shoved them over the edge before the entire offensive could stop itself.

However, that didn't mean the Covenant was finished. As if in retribution, every Wraith fired its plasma mortar. Karla looked up in the sky to see hundreds of energy lances arcing through the air.

"Shit, lets move! Move!"

By now, the majority of the Marines had already boarded their transports and were speeding towards the mining tunnels. Karla, Williams, and Tarin were some of the last Marines remaining. Tarin, who's designated transport had already left, had no choice but to board Karla's Warthog.

"Hope you know how to strap in on this thing." Karla said as she started the engine, "Because we are leaving and leaving \_fast\_."

Plasma fell like rain as Karla gunned the Warthog out of Gryphon Point. The air grew heavy and humid as snow began to melt and steam from the extreme temperatures. Karla tried to increase speed to avoid the rain of plasma. She turned to Williams, who was about to shout something, but it was too late.

A single plasma mortar landed right in front of the Warthog. The shock from the blast flipped the Warthog over. Karla felt herself flying through the air before hitting the ground.

"Hey, wake up, sleepyhead."

Karla's eyes snapped open. The voice was neither Williams' nor Tarin's. It actually sounded like Merl, which was impossible because she had been dead for over a year.

Karla looked around, and saw dozens of Marines around her. She recognized them all as men and women with whom she had served with, and subsequently lost. They were all there, Peterson, McKinnon, Matt, and others. Thankfully, Fisk didn't appear to among the crowd.

"What's going on?" Karla asked.

"Well, that's what we were wondering. How could the Lieutenant we all know and love end up here with us?" Sare, who was killed in a nighttime raid two months ago, said.

Karla was speechless. She never thought that she would ever see these people around her again.

"Someone up there is looking out for you." Karla turned to see Karen crouching next to her. "You're not dead. Pretty damn close, but you've still got some life in you yet."

"How are you-?"

"Hey, while you're here, we just wanted to let you know that we're all still behind you one hundred percent." Karen smiled, "Granted, I may be kind of new to the club, but you get the point. We've only got one piece of advice for you. Just follow the bells."

"What?" Karla asked, but everything seemed to become blurry, and the sounds became fainter. "Waitâ€¦"

"Oh, and don't forget to say hi to Lyn for me." Karen said before everything went black.

"Hey, Lieutenant."

Karla opened her eyes again to see Williams and Tarin looking down at her.

"Jeez, you're still alive." Williams sighed in relief.

Karla slowly got up, ignoring the sharp pain she felt inside her body. She was unsure whatever she just saw was real or just a hallucination, but she didn't want to waste time pondering about it right now.

"Yeah, and plan to keep it that way. How's our ride?"

"I think this may be her last ride."

Karla looked at her Warthog and was crestfallen. The vehicle was flipped onto its side, with black scorches all over the white paint. The damage on the Warthog looked fatal.

"Come on, help me get her upright. There may be some life in her yet." Karla said, echoing Karen's words.

Williams and Tarin looked at each other.

"Well, it beats walking." Tarin shrugged.

With Covenant plasma mortars still raining down sporadically, Williams and Tarin managed to flip the Warthog over, and to their collective surprise, it still ran. The engine slowly coughed to life. They then loaded the wounded Karla into the passenger seat, and Williams took over as the driver. In a few more minutes, the lone Warthog disappeared into the distance.

**\*\*Abandoned Mining Tunnels\*\***

"Damn, this isn't good." Williams muttered. "The nav system is totally shot. There's no way we can navigate these tunnels."

"Well, that's not good." Tarin looked around the dimly lit tunnel. "If we get lost down here, we'll never find our way out, and I don't even want to think how much longer the Warthog can keep running."

"Waitâ€¦!" Karla cocked her head. "I thought I heard something."

Karla strained her hearing more, and soon began to make out the sound. It sounded like the jingling of a bell. Karla thought back to Karen's last words. Could it really be that simple?

"Take the left fork down there." Karla said.

"What?" Williams glanced down the branching paths. "Are you sure?"

"Just a hunch."

**\*\*December 25, 2552**

> <strong>**\*\*UNSC \_Maynard\_**

> <strong>**\*\*Currently in Slipspace transit\*\***

Karla woke up to find herself inside the white, sterile environment of a Navy infirmary. Slightly confused, Karla looked around to see dozens of other wounded Marines lying in bed.

"Well, it's good to see you wake."

Karla looked over to see Doctor Pennert standing beside her bed.

"You've been unconscious for the past four days." Pennert continued, filling out some forms as he talked, "Took some pretty nasty wounds as well. Some broken ribs, a ruptured kidney, internal bleeding, and some burns. All in all, a typical day for you."

"What happened to the kids?"

"Ah, I knew you'd ask that." Pennert grumbled. "Well, I'm sure you'll be glad to know that the hangar deck is absolutely filled with a horde of raunchy, obnoxious children."

Karla smiled, "Glad to hear it."

A few minutes later, without Pennert's knowledge, and still in a considerable amount of pain, Karla had managed to limp her way to the hangar deck, where she ran into a very familiar sight.

"I'm very impressed how you handled that little rearguard action in Gryphon Point." Hubbard smiled, "I can guarantee you that it's going to be in all the military manuals a few years down the lane."

"I'm just overflowing with joy." Karla said sarcastically. "Interesting that I see all the kids opening brand new presents."

"Yeah, a little play on my part. I don't think my boss will be too happy about me using some of those unofficial ONI funds this way, but I think the personal fulfillment is worth it. After all, it's a simple thing to find out what these kids want, especially if you have security clearances like mine."

Karla looked down into the hangar and managed to pick out Lyn, hugging a Marine who bore a striking resemblance to her.

"I wonder how many strings it would have taken to ensure that the ship we were evacuated on just happened to have Kyle Hannever on it."

"I wonder." Hubbard shrugged.

"What about Wane and his unit? What's going to happen to them?"

"I suppose they'll just be folded into existing Marine units."

"In that case, if the name Tarin Richards ever comes across your deskâ€¦"

"I'll be sure to pull the right strings." Hubbard grinned.

"Well, a Merry Christmas to you then, Ryan." Karla hobbled away.

"I've got some kids to see."

"Oh yes, Karla, I almost forgot." Hubbard reached into his pocket. "You dropped this when they were carrying you to the infirmary. I just thought you'd want it back."

Hubbard handed Karla the silver bell she had always carried with her.

"Pity it doesn't work." Hubbard said.

"What, you don't hear it?"

"Hear what?"

Karla looked at the bell. She could clearly hear it jingling, even when Hubbard was still holding it. She then said, "You know what, never mind."

Hubbard shrugged and walked away.

Karla examined the bell a second. Could it really be possible?

"Whatever." Karla muttered and placed the bell back in her pocket. She conceded that even for a skeptic, weird things could happen at this time of year.

"\_You can understand why I hesitated writing about that crazy experience on Tau Serra, but then again, I've had this nagging feeling that it all actually happened. Whether it did or not, I'll leave that up to you. Needless to say, even I've come to believe that this vast, empty galaxy is open to the occasional miracle."\_

\_Karla Wellings\_

End  
file.